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Travelogue: Afghanistan

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FEATURE

Travelogue: Afghanistan

Oren Schlein shares his experiences first hand of Afghanistan, the Taliban and the Adopt-a-Minefield program.

by Oren Schlein, *Executive Director, Adopt-A-Minefield®*

In early July 2001, I traveled to the Afghan cities of Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, and Kandahar. The purpose of my trip was to assess the status of our Adopt-A-Minefield® program in the country. I was hosted by the Mine Action Program for Afghanistan (MAPA), which is a part of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Afghanistan (UNOCHA). This report was written after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC on September 11, 2001. Adopt-A-Minefield® is a program of the United Nations Association of the USA.

Initial Impressions

My field mission to Afghanistan was longer than most of my other visits to mine-affected countries. This was because of the difficulty in obtaining authorization to travel in-country and the rather vast distances between destinations. It took me over a month to obtain my visa to enter Afghanistan and even once I arrived in Kabul, I had to visit a Taliban office to obtain further internal visas to travel within the country. The process of obtaining these visas was a small example of the extremely bureaucratic nature of the Taliban regime.

Afghanistan has suffered such a complete and extreme level of structural collapse over the past two decades of conflict that Afghan society has been thrust back into a primordial age in which nobody takes their daily survival for granted. Essential services that we take for granted in our own societies, including health care and education, and basic infrastructure are virtually non-existent in Afghanistan. The country has also suffered a severe drought for the past four years. Even before the recent mass exodus of Afghans from most urban centers following the September 11th attacks on the United States and the subsequent military strikes on Afghanistan, there were nearly four million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran, and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons living throughout Afghanistan. As recently as this summer, the United Nations and other international aid agencies were providing food and basic humanitarian services to more than three million Afghans. The number of Afghans now in need of such assistance has risen to over seven million, out of a population of 20-21 million people.

In spite of the horrible human tragedy that has afflicted the Afghan people in recent years, they are a remarkably resilient, proud, and generous people. Everywhere we went, we were welcomed with open arms and the heartfelt appreciation of those whose lives we have helped through Adopt-A-Minefield®.

Background to Adopt-A-Minefield® in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been one of the most popular and well managed Adopt-A-Minefield® programs at the country level. This is because MAPA's mine clearance program in Afghanistan has been one of the best coordinated and implemented in the world. The model established by the UN in Afghanistan during the 1990s has served as an important example for developing and managing other national mine action centers. Adopt-A-Minefield® joined the UN's efforts to clear mines in Afghanistan in 1998. Since then, over $550,000 has been raised through the collective fundraising efforts of hundreds of individuals and groups in the United States and overseas for mine clearance operations in the country. The sites included in the Adopt-A-Minefield® portfolio represent a cross-section of the types of projects that MAPA undertakes, both geographically and in terms of the types of clearance tools used. We have funded the clearance of sites in the Central, Western, Eastern, and Southern Regions of Afghanistan, and we have plans to support clearance

This compound near Herat is small, yet demining teams have had to deploy every type of clearance tool at their disposal.

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Village of Deza, near Herat. White markings indicate that the road has been cleared of mines. Red markings indicate that the building itself is still mined.

This site near Herat was cleared with Adopt-a-Minefield® funds. Deminers found 13 anti-tank mines and 8 UXO.

operations in the Northern Region. The diversity of land and topography in Afghanistan is truly remarkable. The skills required to clear all these areas is equally diverse.

MAPA uses four main types of demining resources, including manual clearance teams, mechanical clearance teams, mine detection dogs, and explosive ordnance disposal teams. Afghanistan has about 50 percent of the world's mine detection dogs, and a majority of our Adopt-A-Minefield® sites are cleared with these dogs. MAPA incorporates a *toolbox* approach in its clearance operations, which means that it often uses two or more demining techniques in its work to improve the efficiency of its demining operations. Effective implementation of this approach also results in significant cost savings.

Kabul: 3-5 July 2001

Because of the United Nations sanctions on Afghanistan, all flights in and out of the country are run by the UN, which bases its operations out of Islamabad. The flight path over Kabul is over the Hindu Kush mountains, which are a stunning introduction to Afghanistan and no preparation for the devastation below. By air, one is welcomed to Kabul by the sight of derelict and abandoned buildings, and bombed out planes, tanks, and other remnants of war surrounding the rudimentary runway. No effort has been made to remove these obsolete planes and tanks from the airfield. The terminal itself is a dark, empty, and depressing structure with no electricity and dozens of broken windows. Although a handful of Taliban security don't appear terribly interested in our arrival, I am rather nervous about the fact that I am carrying camera equipment with me, as the Taliban prohibit any photography of live beings, including people and animals. The penalty for being caught is imprisonment.

Our First Security Briefing

The first thing we did upon our arrival at the guesthouse was receive a security briefing. It was perhaps the most important meeting we had in each city we visited because it alerted us to any security problems in the area — perhaps fighting among the Taliban and the Northern Alliance forces, or bandits operating outside the city centers — and what specific evacuation plans were in place in the event we needed to quickly leave the area.

The Taliban Ministry of Interior is the security focal point in Afghanistan. It is responsible for looking after the armed Taliban guards posted outside the UN compounds with their Kalashnikovs — ostensibly to 'protect' the UN staff. In Kabul alone, there are several UN compounds, each housing a different UN office. The Taliban were constantly threatening to evict the UN from these compounds, and negotiating with the Taliban had become a great source of frustration to all UN staff. It had become commonplace for high-level UN officials to spend a majority of their time dealing with administrative issues of this sort, taking them away from the humanitarian assistance work that they sought to provide to the Afghan population.

We were told to avoid the Taliban 'guests' Arabs, Pakistanis and Chechens who came to Afghanistan for terrorist training. This includes not even driving anywhere near their compounds or in areas where they are known to be. Foreigners are told not to accept invitations to Afghan homes. On several occasions, we were invited to dine in their homes, but we did not accept any of these invitations, as the penalty for doing so is imprisonment for the Afghan hosts. Foreigners are also imprisoned, but usually released within hours. Afghans are frequently detained for several days and the detention has been described to me as an 'unpleasant experience.'

The Vice and Virtue

In the weeks before our visit, there had been several incidents monitored by the UN security officer in Kabul, some of which had made it into the international press. Most of these involved the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue the Vice and Virtue, or religious police, as they are more commonly known. They are a constant source of fear to the local Afghan population.

The Vice and Virtue had been particularly active in Kabul in the two months prior to our visit. A couple of foreign workers from the Comprehensive Disabled Afghans' Program, a landmine survivor assistance clinic, had been detained for three days because they had been caught with music tapes in their cars — a 'vice' prohibited by the Taliban. Other vices include owning televisions, video players and satellite dishes, clapping, and singing. Foreigners can be jailed up to 14 days, and Afghans can be detained up to six months and have the power to their homes cut off for any of these offenses.

that the UN be permitted to remain in the compound so that they could continue their work. The sense of exasperation that I heard from many UN workers related to the fact that the Taliban had a habit of making impulsive decisions without considering all the facts and consequences of their actions beforehand.

In spite of the widespread fear, anxiety, and repression that they engender, the Vice and Virtue can also be a source of bemusement to the local population. On our way back to the

Meeting the Taliban

We had a meeting scheduled with the Office of Disaster Preparedness, which includes the Department of Mine Clearance, the official Taliban entity responsible for setting demining priorities along with the UN Mine Action Center for Afghanistan. We were warmly greeted by eight Taliban officials. We removed our shoes, exchanged handshakes, hugs, and smiles, and were seated at a long rectangular table. I introduced myself and explained the Adopt-A-Minefield® program to my hosts. They were pleased that so many of our Adopt-A-Minefield® donors had supported mine clearance efforts in Afghanistan. With the money we had raised in 2000, we were among the top ten donors for mine clearance in Afghanistan, and the only non-governmental organization in this

One of my lasting impressions of Afghanistan is that although the country is beleaguered and the situation often grim, the Afghan people display great fortitude in the face of all their difficulties. Theirs is a very proud can-do attitude and they are unfailingly grateful for any help they receive. I met a number of committed UN employees and brave and resolute deminers during my visit. Afghans are very fond of proverbs and seem to have one for every situation. While we were in Jalalabad, the head of the Mine Detection and Dog Centre shared a poignant proverb with the graduates of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Training Agency, which summed up the efforts of all deminers, aid workers, and donors: 'A person who saves one life saves a society.'

A few days before my arrival in Kabul, the Taliban had scaled the walls of one of the UN compounds, with their Kalashnikovs in hand. They spent 15 minutes rifling through the premises, having a good look at all the rooms, equipment, and fixtures. Shortly after their departure, the head of the UN regional office received a call from a senior Taliban official informing her that the UN had 15 days to vacate the premises. This bullish attitude is very typical of the Taliban's treatment of the UN and other foreign aid agencies. This particular story had a better ending than most — UN staff engaged in several late night discussions with their Taliban counterparts, explaining their legal rights of abode and that it was in the best interests of the Afghan people

UN guesthouse, we passed a contingent of Vice and Virtue in their archetypal black Toyota pickup truck — the vehicle of choice among the religious police. They were driving through the streets of Kabul shouting at the locals through speakers mounted on the top of their truck. As we passed them, I noticed that my Afghan host was not wearing his turban. This is an essential requirement for every Afghan male. He turned to our driver with a big grin on his face and told him to drive faster. I asked him whether or not he was concerned about being stopped and he proceeded to laugh out loud and tell me that the Vice and Virtue were essentially a 'bunch of clowns.'

Children from the village of Deza, on the outskirts of Herat. The children play in recently demined areas, awaiting final clearance of their village.

FEATURE

■ The village of Lala Qala, near Jalalabad, has witnessed 50 mine accidents. In a 22,000m² area of agricultural land, deminers recently found 26 antipersonnel landmines and three unexploded ordnance.

■ A deminer provides a security briefing near the village of Jowkan.

category. It was a point that was not lost on my Taliban hosts. It also didn't appear to matter much whether the donors were American or European, so long as we were all helping the Afghan people.

At one point in the meeting, however, I heard the interpreter emphasize to the Taliban the fact that I was from New Zealand and not the United States. As a dual national, I chose to travel to Afghanistan on my New Zealand passport, given the sensitive political climate in the region. It turns out that in spite of my best efforts to talk cricket and rugby — the national sports in New Zealand — I never fooled them. I have it on good authority that the Taliban use their close connections with the ISI, the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence, to investigate foreign visitors and they knew before I even entered the country that I was American. At that moment, I reflected upon a conversation I had had with the former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan a few days earlier in Islamabad, in which he informed me that if anything happened to me while in Afghanistan, there was nothing the U.S. Government could do to protect me.

Regional Mine Action Center

After our meeting with the Taliban officials, we met with representatives from the Kabul Regional Mine Action Center (RMAC). The Kabul RMAC is the organization responsible for overseeing the survey and clearance of mined areas in the Central Region of Afghanistan. It works closely with the national Mine Action Center in Islamabad and with its implementing partners — those nongovernmental organizations that specialize in mine clearance, survey work, mine awareness, and survivor assistance.

Our first visit was a tour of the headquarters and kennels of the Mine Detection and Dog Center (MDC) in Kabul. This organization was established in 1989 and is recognized as one of the most advanced mine detection dog organizations in the world. It works under the auspices of UNOCHA and MAPA. Originally funded by the United States, MDC is now funded by Germany. MDC's objectives are to clear priority mined areas and to survey suspected mined areas. It has its own breeding program with more than 100 dogs and operates in four of Afghanistan's five regions.

The Village of Merza Khail

On the Fourth of July, we ventured into our first mine field, an area known as AFG-070 (a number designated by Adopt-A-Minefield®), which was being cleared by MDC. During the Soviet occupation, Russian forces used the main road near Merza Khail to travel between a nearby military base, which housed a rocket depot, and the Pakistan border. The road was heavily mined by the Mujahedeen to deter the Russians, and today all the villages in the area are suffering the consequences of this mine contamination.

During our visit, we met with seven village elders. They told us that many mine accidents still occur along the road and near the village. Several children have been maimed and killed by mines in recent years and, as a result, they are confined to specific areas in and around the village. Villagers have also found mines while ploughing the arid fields behind the village and many animals have been lost to mines. Even the village well was mined during the war, rendering the village's main water source unusable.

When I asked how old the village was, I was told that it was 'five or eight great-grandfathers old.' Before the Soviet occupation, 80 families of five or six people each lived in the village. Now, only 20 families remain, with most having left the area and settled as refugees in Pakistan. With regard to the mine problem, Niamatuwllah, the village elder, explained that his village has a home-based school for boys, not girls, which incorporates mine awareness into its curriculum. He also mentioned that the school only teaches the Koran, and no secular subjects. In addition, the deminers working in the area provide mine awareness training sessions two times a week to the children and men. This effort to increase local awareness about the mine problem is part of a countrywide effort in Afghanistan to integrate mine awareness into the activities of demining organizations. Because of the Taliban prohibition on women receiving any form of education, and certainly any form of training by men, the mine action community in Afghanistan has established female mine awareness teams based in the cities that travel to the villages to instruct women on the dangers of mines. The reality is that women rarely venture out of their homes or villages, so the immediate threat of mine injuries is significantly less to them than it is to men and children.

The Clearance Process

MDC was halfway through clearing the road around Merza Khail when we visited. They had a five-week-long clearance plan, in which they expected to clear 117,523m², a five-kilometer stretch of land about 25-30 meters wide. Mine Dog Group 7, or MDG7 as it is known, is led by Taj Mohammed, the group leader. His group is split into two sections of six deminers each, two dogs with handlers, and one section leader. In addition, MDG7 has one paramedic and two drivers to assist with medical emergencies, transportation of the deminers and their equipment, and other logistical requirements.

As with most mine clearance operations, this particular demining project was slow, tedious, and dangerous. The demining teams mark off a base line from which to operate and deploy the dogs along an eight-meter-long leash. They are trained to sit in place if and when they detect anything suspicious, at which point the dog handler calls the section leader to the area. The section leader marks a two-square-meter area, using the dog's position as the center point. The dog is given a blue ball as a reward for his efforts and the manual deminers are then called in to clear the area.

A Glimpse into the Soviet Occupation—the Village of Surkhab

Following our visit to Merza Khail, we drove 15 minutes south to the village of Surkhab, along a shelled road with large, deep artillery craters. The sites that have been scheduled for clearance lie along both sides of the road. Before the drought, the entire region was fertile agricultural and grazing land. Now, it is a massive, dry lakebed. Most of the area is littered with landmines, particularly antitank mines laid by the Mujahedeen to protect their positions against advancing Russian troops. There have also been several accidents along the road, including children injured while playing with mines and unexploded ordnance. The net effect of the drought and mine problem on the village of Surkhab is that three-quarters of the 90 families in the village have left the area. Twenty families remain; the rest are refugees in Pakistan.

The village is 'three fathers old' about 100 years. It has suffered extensive hardship over the past 20 years. In 1980, the Russians attacked all the villages in the valley, but Surkhab suffered particularly badly. The Russians conducted repeated aerial bombings of the village because it was home to several Mujahedeen fighters. At one point, the Russians raided the village for five continuous hours, shooting a dozen men, women, and children, and taking all the animals.

Following this incident, most of the villagers abandoned their homes, heading for the hills above or fleeing the valley for Pakistan. Tragically, four villagers, all Mujahedeen, remained behind. They were captured by the Russian forces and locked in the village Mosque, a simple room, which was set afire. Three died and one was severely injured. Their fellow villagers witnessed the incident through binoculars. The three victims are martyrs to the Afghan jihad, or holy war, against the Russians. The Mosque in which they died is now a mausoleum to Tela Mohamed, Berget, and Lal Gul. The one survivor, Hazart Gul, now lives as a refugee in Iran.

Za Zai, the village elder who told me this story, said that village life was forever changed by this incident. Most of the villagers who lived in refugee camps during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan now have established lives in Afghan communities in Pakistan. Surkhab receives no food or other assistance from aid agencies. Most of the villagers work as laborers in Pakistan and Iran to support their families. The average laborer in Afghanistan earns $0.80 a day; in Pakistan, they can earn over $1 a day. This is still less than the $4 a day necessary to feed a family of 8-10 people, but with multiple family members working, most villagers just manage to survive.

RMAC has surveyed the area around Surkhab and identified 160,000m² of land that will need to be cleared to accommodate the needs of the entire village. In the process of surveying the land, the deminers found one antitank mine by the side of the road. As a result, the villagers are more vigilant than ever, they welcome mine awareness teams to

■ Children from the village of Surkhab, Logar Province, which suffers from severe mine contamination and a four-year-old-drought.

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Emergency, a landmine survivor assistance clinic

The Vice and Virtue had scaled the walls of Emergency, with their Kalashnikovs, on May 17, 2001. They were upset by reports of men and women eating together in the clinic's cafeteria. Rather than approach the clinic's administrators and investigate the alleged incidents, they beat up local staff and foreigners, arrested several workers, and shut down the clinic, which had only recently opened. Emergency had an annual budget of $1 million and had built a state-of-the-art facility in Kabul. They have similar clinics in other mine-affected countries and have provided medical services, including complex life-saving surgeries, to 200,000 people — about 20-25 percent of whom are mine survivors — worldwide over the past seven years. The Kabul clinic was to have been one of the better sources of medical care in Afghanistan, supported by several first aid posts around the country. Since the raid, it has sat idle and vacant.

their village, and they carefully monitor the movements of their children.

A Demining Challenge

A mine field is a difficult concept to grasp without having visited a range of sites. There are so many physical characteristics to mine fields, differing types of terrain, and varying climatic conditions in which to undertake clearance operations. On the last day of our visit to Kabul, we visited the village of Pashaye, a two-hour drive from the capital.

The Dara-i-Pashaye valley, in which Pashaye is located, was one of the most fertile areas I visited during my Afghan travels. It was green, agriculturally productive, and clearly not affected by the drought that has devastated so much of the rest of Afghanistan. Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC), the country's largest demining organization, had cleared much of the agricultural land in the valley, which has been returned to the villagers. They were now hard at work clearing the rocky hills above.

On the day of our visit, ATC had found three antipersonnel landmines. As we sat in our vantage point halfway up the hill, we observed more than 20 deminers carefully sweeping the ground with their metal detectors, occasionally crouching down to clear the earth around a suspected mined area. The deminers faced two big problems. The hills were steep and the deminers were susceptible to accidents if not careful, and the soil itself was hard and comprised of stones of high metallic content. The metallic content slowed down the clearance process considerably because they triggered false alarms, each one requiring the deminers to manually check the ground for mines. It was by far the most perilous mine field that I have seen cleared over the past several years.

There is a very sad footnote to this story. Several days after our visit, we received news that one of the ATC deminers had slipped while unearthing a suspected mine in these same hills above Pashaye. The deminer lost part of his leg. Until this accident, MAPA had not suffered any demining casualties in 2001, a significant drop from the 11 accidents in 2000. It was a solemn moment for the entire demining community in Afghanistan.

Jalalabad: 6-7 July 2001

Early in the morning of July 6th, we left the UN guesthouse in Kabul for the five-hour drive to Jalalabad, Afghanistan's easternmost city, about an hour's drive from the Pakistan border. The road was better than most in Afghanistan, even though more than half of it was still unpaved. We caught glimpses of many unexploded ordnance, including artillery shells and rockets, lying by the side of the road and high up in the hills above us. Jalalabad is distinctly different from Kabul. It is greener, more relaxed, and in some respects more animated than the capital city. It is also much hotter and more humid than Kabul. In more prosperous times, Jalalabad was a holiday retreat from Kabul.

We met officials from the Regional Mine Action Centre for the Eastern Region, who discussed the mine contamination problem in the area. As throughout Afghanistan, the Russians and the Mujahedeen both laid mines during the Soviet occupation. After the departure of Russian forces, the UN estimated that there was 131km^2 of mined land, including 110km^2 of high priority land, which needed to be cleared to enable refugees to return to their homes and existing populations to cultivate their land. To date, 60 percent of the high priority areas in the Eastern Region have been cleared, more than 70,000 mines and 91,000 UXO have been destroyed, and nearly three million metal fragments found. In addition, more than 1.2 million people have received mine awareness instruction.

National Capacity Building

One of the key challenges facing the international landmine community is to develop national capacities for local mine action organizations to manage their own programs without disproportionate external assistance. The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan has illustrated the success of this approach over the past 12 years. In 1990, when the program officially started, there were a few hundred deminers assisted by dozens of international technical advisors. Today, there are nearly 5,000 Afghan deminers and program managers, assisted by less than a dozen expatriates.

The Poppy Fields of Jalalabad

In Jalalabad, we visited three Adopt-A-Minefield® sites along the former frontline between the Mujahedeen and Russian troops. The area witnessed heavy fighting and considerable casualties. Hills and mountainous terrain run along a North-South corridor known for its abundant production of poppies. The poppy trade has been one of the greatest sources of income for Afghanistan in recent years, furnishing a vast amount of the world's heroin supply. In 2000, Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban, ordered that all poppy crops in the region be destroyed and replaced with wheat. On this blisteringly hot, sunny July afternoon, as we drove through the villages of Nangarhar province, there were no poppy fields in sight.

One of the villages we visited, Lala Qala, had been a base for the Mujahedeen fighters attacking Russian positions in the hills. The area had witnessed 50 mine incidents and in a 22,000m^2 area of agricultural land that had recently been cleared, deminers had found 26 antipersonnel landmines and three unexploded ordnance, as well as nearly 20,000 metal fragments. It took 35 days to clear the area, benefiting 400 people from the local village. Aiding their efforts, the deminers relied upon a mechanical backhoe excavator. Unlike manual clearance efforts or mine detection dogs, mechanical mine clearance can be significantly faster, although proportionately more expensive. Although mechanical mine clearance is the least cost effective clearance tool, the deminers lower costs by using Afghan machines and spare parts. Although not appropriate for all terrain, the excavator is ideally suited for the flat agricultural fields and irrigation canals of Lala Qala.

Herat: 8-10 July 2001

Herat is unlike either Kabul or Jalalabad—it's a beautiful, desolate desert town. As we flew into Herat, all we could see for miles was a barren, dusty wasteland. It was hard to imagine that the terrain could support any life.

This area between Kabul and Halalabad is one of the few not to have suffered from Afghanistan's recent drought.

Unexpectedly, the city appeared like an oasis in the distance. While its outer perimeter blended into the outlying desert, the city itself was remarkably green and lush, with handsome minarets and mosques dotting the city center.

The UN security officer at the UN guesthouse informed us that there were all sorts of Afghan factions in the mountains around Herat who were fighting each other. At times, these factions allied themselves against the Taliban. There was a major Taliban base south of the city and there were major security threats to the east and south. In fact, the local militia had erected large roadblocks and the threats were so severe that the Taliban rarely ventured along the main road east of Herat anymore. The west was relatively quiet because of a large Taliban presence, and the north experienced some limited activity.

Upon inquiring, I was informed that there was no evidence that either the Taliban or local militia were laying mines in the Western Region. Nevertheless, large numbers of mines left over from the 1980s threatened the local populations, the Kuchi (nomad) tribes, and the 95,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) living in the area. There were six IDP camps near Herat and large Kuchi populations that moved about frequently in search of arable land, as the drought was particularly severe in western Afghanistan. Awareness of the mine problem was limited in Herat. In the past two years, mines had injured 15 IDPs, three in 2001 alone, and these are only the reported cases.

The Organisation for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR) is among those organizations that has conducted comprehensive mine awareness instruction throughout the region in an effort to educate the population and help stem the tide of mine victims. One afternoon, we visited an outdoor mine awareness class on the main road out of Herat. At least 50 children were in attendance. The collection of materials, including silkscreen posters and coloring books, was impressive given the limited resources. We had also hoped to see a women's mine awareness class, but the local Taliban officials even forbade the Western female in our party from attending.

Sand Storms Near the Turkmenistan Border

We visited five minefields while in Herat, but the most memorable was Kuhkst, about 25 kilometers south of the Turkmenistan border. As we approached Kuhkst, a sand storm descended upon us and we were overcome by a sand swell, which didn't let up for 15 minutes. Apparently, both sides of the road were mined. It was hard to imagine that this agricultural land was viable given the harsh conditions. Yet, the soil has such unique properties that they could grow rain-fed crops. I found myself in a field of sunflowers and melons, although I couldn't see more than five feet in front of me. In spite of the strong winds and sand storms, manual deminers had been clearing the entire area—a seemingly impossible task. It once again illustrated the perseverance and courage of the deminers.

The village of Haji Basher was a former Russian military base along the main transit route from Pakistan. The red stone markings indicate suspected mined areas

Residential Mine Fields

Along the main road leading into Herat are several villages that were heavily mined during the Soviet occupation, including the village of Deza. It is located next to an old Russian munitions dump, which the Mujahedeen blew up during the war. The ensuing fire burned for three days and three nights. In all, 14 people were injured and eight killed. The explosions also destroyed many homes. Years after this incident, the villagers of Deza and four nearby villages continue to suffer from the presence of mines. There have been several mine accidents and much land is unusable. During recent clearance operations, deminers found more than 300 UXO and 48 antipersonnel landmines in the area immediately adjacent to the old munitions depot. As we walked through the village, debris, including old burned out tanks, was strewn everywhere. Red stones and red flags marked those areas where mines had been found, some as close as five or ten meters from village homes. Several children greeted us during our visit. They played in areas that had been cleared by the deminers, although it was evident that so long as some of this land remained mined, there was an accident waiting to happen.

A few miles closer to Herat is a compound belonging to one of the city's prominent religious elders, Eamaddin, who has more than 200 followers. During the war, Russian forces used his large, luxurious house as a military base and also conducted heavy aerial bombings of the area. The site changed hands many times between the Russians and Mujahedeen. What remains today are some external walls and the façade of some of the houses within the compound. The area is so heavily contaminated with mines that none of Eamaddin's family are able to return to their homes. Of the eight families that lived here before the war, six families are refugees in Iran, and two families have returned to Herat to rebuild the compound once it has been cleared of mines. Eighty family members in all hope to move back after demining operations are completed later this year. Wahid Duddin, Eamaddin's son, lives on the edge of the compound with his two sons and wife in a new house that he has built until he can move back into his old home. They are literally living in a live mine field. In 1995, an antipersonnel landmine killed one of Wahid's relatives and injured another when they entered the compound.

Kandahar: 11-13 July 2001

The final stop on our Afghan journey was Kandahar, home of the Taliban. After more than a week of hearing Taliban stories from my UN hosts, and having met a few in Kabul, I was somewhat apprehensive at the realization that I would be spending the next few days in Mullah Omar's backyard. Mullah Omar lives just a few miles from the airport, and we passed his home on our way to the UN guesthouse. As the guesthouse is on the opposite side of town from the airport, we also had to drive through the central marketplace. It was bustling with activity, more so than any of the other cities we had visited. This was largely because the Taliban feel more secure in Kandahar than elsewhere in Afghanistan and they impose fewer restrictions on the local population. As foreigners, however, we were strongly advised to keep an even lower profile in Kandahar than in the other Afghan cities.

Kandahar has a long and turbulent history. The city was destroyed during the Soviet occupation. Years of fighting have left it with the dubious distinction of being the most heavily mined city in Afghanistan. As I discovered during my two-day visit to Kandahar, virtually every part of the city has been mined. Homes and agricultural fields within a stone's throw of the UN guesthouse are mine-contaminated. It is an urban disaster that has not afflicted other Afghan cities to the same degree, nor with the same level of long-term humanitarian consequences. The mine problem is not limited to Kandahar city, however. The rural areas of the Southern Region are equally affected.

A demining dog and handler from the Afghan organization, Mine Detection and Dog Centre.

Demining a City

The most poignant memories I have of Kandahar are visiting mine-affected communities on both sides of the main road that runs through the center of town. The first site we visited was Ward 6, a five-minute drive from the UN guesthouse, on the west side of Kandahar. The site is a 51,405m^2 residential area, which was the scene of intense fighting between Russian troops and the Mujahedeen. The Russians held the top of an adjacent hill to monitor traffic on the main road below. The Mujahedeen advanced from positions on the other side of the hill. Both parties heavily mined the area. Because of the complications of detecting and removing mines and unexploded ordnance amid the rubble of the old homes, the demining teams have had to flatten many of the houses. As of my visit, they had unearthed 71 antipersonnel landmines and 189 UXO, and the most complex part of the task, clearing the area around the walls of the homes, was yet to be completed.

An hour's drive to the east, we reached the village of Haji Basher. Haji Basher was a former Russian military base along the main transit route from Pakistan, which was used as a strategic post to defend Kandahar city. The village was so strategically important to the Russians that they laid a large mine belt around the village and surrounding areas. Although most of the villagers no longer live in Haji Basher, Kuchi tribes regularly travel through the area. Because of the high level of mine contamination, the accident rate is very high. There have been 15 accidents in this area, including three deminers, five Kuchis and villagers, and several animals. While walking through the 'safe lanes' (two lines of white painted rocks) carved out of the mine belt, we found the remains of a camel that had detonated a mine last year. Because of the high-density nature of the mine field, mine detection dogs do not work well in this terrain and the local demining organizations do not have suitable machines to clear the land. The entire area is being cleared manually. Eight different tasks have been surveyed and it is expected that it will take several more months to complete the project.

Our final stop was a medical and agricultural university in the heart of Kandahar. The school was heavily mined during the Soviet occupation and most of the buildings were either bombed or ransacked. It was a difficult clearance task because of all the rubble. Deminers found 19 antipersonnel landmines and 10 unexploded ordnance in the compound. Although most of the buildings have not yet been reconstructed, the students we met were very proud that they were able to study in such adverse conditions. Our UN hosts informed us that these same students had helped loot their own classrooms during the occupation.

To Quetta and Home

We concluded our trip to Afghanistan with a sumptuous meal provided to us by the Kandahar office of the Mine Detection and Dog Centre. Because of the restrictions on foreigners visiting Afghan homes, all the demining organizations we met in our travels offered us elaborate meals or refreshments in their offices or in

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The desecrated mausoleum of the former King of Afghanistan, King Nadir Shah, the father of the exiled King Zahir Shah.

the field. We never lacked enough good Afghan food—Palau, lamb korma, chicken korma, melon, firni (milk custard dessert), and green tea. The hospitality extended to us was unforgettable.

Afghanistan Program Update

Since the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, and the most recent military strikes against Afghanistan, the United Nations has suspended all demining operations in Afghanistan until security conditions improve. As a result, we have had to temporarily suspend all minefield adoptions through the Adopt-A-Minefield® program in Afghanistan. UNOCHA and MAPA offices throughout the country are closed, except for a small number of deminers who have been retained in each regional center to respond to emergency needs. UNOCHA and MAPA headquarters in Islamabad remain open and MAPA is currently developing post-war plans for responding to the immediate threats resulting from the current conflict.

Once demining operations resume, we expect MAPA to reassess the mine contamination problem in the country and to formulate a new work plan for its clearance activities. It is possible that some of those Adopt-A-Mine-field® sites that were being cleared or scheduled for clearance when the program was suspended may no longer be high priority sites once this reassess-ment is concluded. We will inform all donors whose sites are affected by this reassessment and offer them alternative sites to which they can apply their funds. All donations received for the Adopt-A-Minefield® program in Afghanistan prior to the suspension will remain in escrow with the United Nations until clearance operations resume.

Since the military strikes against Afghanistan were launched, the UN has resumed limited humanitarian aid to Afghanistan to try and alleviate some of the harsher consequences of the drought and the population displacements. MAPA for its part is developing contingency plans for addressing the probable impact of the current military strikes. They have identified three areas of critical concern to the projected 1.5 million Afghan refugees and 2.25 million internally displaced persons: the threat of existing mines and UXO; the threat of collateral damage from extensive aerial bombardment; and the threat of new mines, UXO, and munitions. MAPA's response to these threats will include strengthening existing mine awareness capacities around the country; deploying quick reaction teams to each major city; and utilizing survey teams, clearance teams, and explosive ordnance disposal teams to clear roads and essential urban areas in order that humanitarian activities can resume and that refugees and internally displaced persons can return to their homes. Currently, MAPA is training its staff and partner organizations to address Afghanistan's post-war requirements. Until it can resume operations inside Afghanistan, MAPA is focusing its efforts on providing essential mine awareness instruction to refugees and internally displaced persons along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Adopt-A-Minefield® has established an Afghanistan Emergency Response Fund to accept donations to support the UN's emergency response efforts in Afghanistan. We will forward the UN one hundred percent (100%) of all donations received through this Fund. Adopt-A-Minefield® will work closely with its UN colleagues in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and New York to obtain regular updates, which will be posted on our website (www.landmines. org).

Over the long-term, the Afghan people must have their land cleared regardless of who rules their country or how hard their lives are. Afghans need help now more than ever. Prior to the current conflict, landmines affected all aspects of life in Afghanistan. Recent events have compounded the hardship that communities across the country face and significantly increased the pressures on the financially strapped mine clearance organizations that operate in the country. In the weeks to come, we are hopeful that the situation in the region will stabilize and enable the UN to resume its demining operations. In the meantime, Adopt-A-Minefield® will continue to support the UN's humanitarian work through the Afghanistan Emergency Response Fund. ■

This travelogue is excerpted from a full-length document, which can be viewed online at www.landmines.org or by requesting a copy at info@landmines.org.

**All photos courtesy of Adopt-A-Minefield.*

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